WORTHY
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Psalm 46
Luke 18:9–14
2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12

"To this end we always pray for you,
asking that our God will make you worthy of his call."
2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NRSV)

Religion took over the legacy of Paul as it did that of Jesus—
because they both opposed it. They said that the worship of God
is a matter of interior love, not based on external observances,
on temples or churches, on hierarchies or priesthoods.
Both were at odds with those who impose the burdens of "religion"
and punish those who try to escape them. They were radical egalitarians,
though in ways that delved below and soared above conventional politics.
They were on the side of the poor and saw through the rich.
They saw only two basic moral duties, love of God and love of the neighbor.
Both were liberators, not imprisoners—so they were imprisoned.
So they were killed. Paul meant what Jesus meant, that love is the only law.

Garry Wills
What Paul Meant

Catholic-Protestant relationships are just not what they used to be, thanks be to God. In our family, the issue has taken on a whole new dimension. Three little granddaughters alternate: one Sunday they go to Mass at St. Mathias; the next Sunday they are here, at Fourth Presbyterian Church. They seem not even to notice, nor are they aware that they are brave pioneers, pushing back a frontier into which their ancestors—on both sides of their family—could not, and would not if they could, venture. I'm counting on them. My hope is that when they are asked, "Are you Catholic or Protestant?" they will answer, "Yes." I'm counting on them to bring to an end almost 500 years of separation, hostility, conflict, oftentimes violence and war

during those five centuries. But for now, I have to say, we seem to have something of an edge. And it has to do with doughnut holes. We serve them at the Coffee Hour after worship, and the girls love them, head straight for them in Anderson Hall, weaving in and out of the crowd like an NFL running back on the way to the end zone. When they go to St. Mathias and cross themselves and make their way to their pew, three-year-old Ella says—loudly, I hope—"Where are the doughnut holes?" So we'll keep our edge for a while, at least until Father Keohan finds out and starts providing Krispy Kremes for St. Mathias.

It all began 490 years ago, when an Augustinian monk and priest in Wittenberg, Germany, nailed to the church door 95 theses he wanted to discuss publicly. The theses were about the church—what it is and what it's for—and about personal salvation: how it happens and who gets to decide. The public discussion happened. Luther was condemned, excommunicated, then branded a criminal, and the rest, as they say, is history, much of it heroic and inspiring, much of it trivial and tragic. And Reformation Sunday is the day when we think a bit about the church and what it means to be Protestant, part of that 500-year-old movement called "Reformation."

In his new book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes, minister of the Memorial Church, Harvard University, describes sitting in an Episcopal Church in Virginia where he was invited to be the preacher for the church's 150th anniversary. It was a "splendid" day. The planners of the festivities had decided that the liturgy would be the same Morning Prayer that would have been used in that parish 150 years earlier. The liturgy included the General Supplication "Remember not, Lord, our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers."

Gomes reflects,

> Here we are in Virginia, in a church established just a few years before the Civil War and near some of the fiercest fighting of that war. Here is a church where one hundred and fifty years ago neither the current rector—a woman—nor the guest preacher—an African American—would have been allowed anywhere near where we were on that anniversary Sunday. (pp. 187–188)

Gomes looked up to see George Washington in a stained glass window above the altar. "It was not difficult to remember who the forefathers and foremothers were in this place, nor to imagine that at least one of their conspicuous sins was the belief that it was not wrong for

Christians to hold other human beings, even fellow Christians, in chattel bondage."

Gomes says he took perverse pleasure asking God to forgive the sins of those particular forefathers and mothers. He was reminded that the ancestors often got it wrong—that "we, too, can, and often do, get it wrong: that someday someone will pray to God to forgive us. That is why," he says, "the most profound of all religious sentiments should not be certainty, which inevitably leads to arrogance, but modesty, which because of a generous God, leads to mercy and forgiveness" (p. 189).

From certainty to arrogance.

In that same chapter, Gomes goes on to remember the self-righteousness that characterized Reformation Day observances not so very long ago—gathering on Sunday afternoon "ostensibly to celebrate the nailing of Luther's theses to the church door, which in 1517 started the Reformation, but actually to celebrate the fact that we were not Catholics"—and then he recites the silly stereotypes: "Catholics, we all knew, did everything the pope and priests told them to do, didn't think for themselves, refrained from eating meat on Fridays, put ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday and generally voted Democratic. . . . The mere thought of a Roman Catholic president of the United States made many people very nervous" (p. 191).

I was reminded of my very first serious conflict in ministry, which resulted in the loss of a family from a congregation that couldn't afford to lose anyone. I was still a student at the time, had just arrived to assume responsibility for a small church. A man called and asked to talk with me, and what he wanted was for me to say from the pulpit that it was wrong and sinful to vote for Senator John F. Kennedy, who was running for president, because he was a Catholic. And he wanted me to be part of an organization of concerned Protestant ministers and lay leaders devoted to that same objective. I refused. He became angry—and quit. It was a sobering introduction to the church. I reencountered that whole business reading a fine book about Billy Graham and his relationship with every president from Eisenhower forward. Graham was invited—and refused—to be part of a national effort by Protestant leaders to see that Kennedy, the Catholic, was defeated. Norman Vincent Peale, the very popular minister of Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan and author of the huge bestseller *The Power of Positive Thinking,* convened 150 Protestant leaders, "Citizens for Religious Freedom," and wrote a manifesto against electing a Catholic president. Peale told the press that "American

culture is at stake” and said he wondered whether Kennedy, or any Roman Catholic candidate, could be trusted to operate “free from Vatican pressure” (p. 91).

We have come a long way from the suspicion and hostility and all the silliness of the past. Protestants were warned against entering a Catholic church. Catholics were told that it was a serious sin to enter a Protestant church and crossed the street to avoid walking in front of one. Marriage between a Protestant and Catholic was such an ordeal that both churches advised against it, made it difficult, warned against Protestant-Catholic dating even. When two cousins of mine married Catholics, it provoked a family crisis from which two aunts never fully recovered. We have come a long way and thanks be to God the old issues that stirred our ancestors have mostly been resolved or simply disappeared.

Of course there are issues over which we disagree. Earlier this year the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued a statement that said that Protestant denominations are not “churches in the proper sense.” It seemed to many like a step backward, even though it was nothing new. The head of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kaspar—whom I am privileged to know—has explained that “the statement doesn’t mean we aren’t a church, just not a church in the sense that the Catholic church understands itself to be a church.”

There are issues that divide us, and I have learned that they are issues over which Catholics themselves disagree and struggle, just as we do. Earlier this year the Vatican issued a statement that said the removal of feeding tubes from a patient in a permanent vegetative state is wrong and “violates the principles of Christianity and civilization.” Many disagree—in fact come to the opposite conclusion based on our own sense of what is good and ethical and moral and loving.

Perhaps no issue is as difficult and divisive as reproductive rights, abortion, between the two faith communities, but also within them. The new Planned Parenthood Clinic in Aurora came under enormous pressure and was prevented from opening for a while by abortion opponents, both Catholic and Evangelical Protestants, who not only oppose abortion, but also the right for women to exercise choice and who make it very difficult to have a civil conversation by calling the procedure “murder,” which essentially stops the conversation. And then opposing and lobbying against the only thing that has a chance of reducing the number of abortions, which we all agree is a noble goal, namely sex education, easy access to birth control, and

availability of health care for women—of the kind Planned Parenthood provides. Even the United States government, under enormous pressure, refuses to support agencies that provide family planning, birth control, and abortions and pours millions of dollars into abstinence education programs that everyone knows are not working.

We have come a long way, but we still have plenty to talk about.

Those two men praying in the temple in the New Testament lesson this morning provide a template. They both came to the temple to pray: the Pharisee—the good guy here, respectable, devout, generous—looked over and saw the other man, a tax collector, a despised marginalized traitor, a collaborator with Rome, and he, the Pharisee, utters a remarkable prayer: "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, thieves, adulterers, even him—the tax collector." The tax collector wouldn't even look up, beat his breast—a gesture of remorse—and prayed a simple prayer: "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

It is a warning about being so certain of the rightness of your religion that you simply dismiss the other, so sure that your moral conclusions reflect the mind of God that you characterize the person who comes to other, different, conclusions as sinful.

Douglas John Hall, Canadian theologian, writes that Protestantism "historically and classically understood, implies a polemic against all pretension of finality of doctrine and understanding" (*Confessing the Faith*).

And our own Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary, said that simply and clearly: "The Reformed tradition means that . . . none of us, even the church, gets it right all the time."

The Reformed, or Reforming, tradition is that only God is God. We are not. The only ultimate is God. The only perfection is God's perfect love. Everything human is limited by our humanness. Everything human is open to critique and reformation, particularly when it comes to religion, with its inherent tendency toward certainty and arrogance. It is a precious Protestant tradition to subject our best institutions—our government, our churches—to question and criticism, because we know they are not perfect. The only ultimate truth is Jesus Christ, not the church, not what the church says about him, not what the church or anyone else says you must to do honor and follow him. The ultimate truth is the one God revealed in Jesus Christ. Everything human, even the church, is open to question, doubt, and interrogation.

The great theologian Paul Tillich called that the “Protestant Principle”: God alone is Lord. Nothing else is ultimate; everything requires reformation.

To the early Christian church in Thessalonika, St. Paul wrote, “To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God make you worthy of his call.”

Worthy of God’s call. Martin Luther—a “wrestler with God,” Martin Marty calls him — struggled with his own sense of vocation, call. His personal spiritual journey was difficult. Nothing he did—no amount of praying, fasting, pilgrimages, even flagellating himself—brought him a sense of God’s blessing and love, God’s purpose for his life. And then, after he had tried everything, every religious discipline imaginable, he discovered grace—or grace discovered him. We are saved, Luther discovered, not by anything we do, not because we are good and deserving, obedient and pious. We are saved simply because God loves us. The Christian life, therefore, is not so much one of rigorous, grim, determined discipline, but a joyful, grateful expression of love. We are called, all of us, he said, to a life of grateful love to God and to our neighbors.

That is the heart of the matter. It is not Protestant or Catholic. It is Christian: both Protestants and Catholics agree on that now. Saved by grace, we are called, all of us, to lives of grateful love, a calling to which I, we, still pray to be worthy.

I keep discovering the oneness all believers share in Christ and also the richness of our tradition. Like my granddaughters, I suppose I’m becoming, at the same time, more Catholic and more Presbyterian. This past spring, I was part of a group of Presbyterian ministers from around the world who met in Geneva to talk about how the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition is faring in our respective countries and cultures. There were men and women from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Brazil, Korea, Indonesia, Scotland, Hungary, Switzerland, and the United States. It was a good and rich reminder to me that there are 80 million Reformed Presbyterians around the world, that Presbyterianism has had a profound and healthy and life-giving effect —in schools, colleges, universities, clinics, and hospitals as well as churches around the world—and that in Africa, for instance, the Presbyterian church is experiencing phenomenal growth. It was good to be reminded.

While I was there I discovered something that made me even more grateful for the tradition. In the sixteenth century, when conflict between the new Reformed Churches and the established order, the

monarchies, the Roman church, broke out and people were persecuted and imprisoned and executed, refugees from all over Europe flooded to Geneva, which under John Calvin's leadership had become a free and safe haven for them. Near the south gate in the old city wall, there is a small chapel. The south gate faces toward France, and it was along that road and through that gate that the refugees would have walked. In the chapel, the Diaconate from Calvin's church, the Deacons, welcomed the refugees with food, clothing, provided for their lodging, and helped find work.

It's a precious part of our tradition—expressing the gentle, loving hospitality of a gracious God to needy men, women, and children.

It's the calling to which I aspire, worthiness for myself and for this church.

We are all one in God's eyes. Every Reformation Sunday I think about my friend Bob McLaughlin, Father Bob McLaughlin, who was Pastor of Holy Name Cathedral, as close a clergy friend as I've had. We talked about our two congregations and how alike they were. We laughed about all the Catholics who attend here and all the Presbyterians who attend there. We talked about establishing joint membership with reciprocal privileges, like the big clubs do, and decided it might be a while before our two denominations could accommodate that. And we talked about the Cubs, which he loved even more fervently than I. Bob died not long after he moved from Holy Name. On the last New Year's Eve of his pastorate, we invited him to preach here, and he did. Before the service, after we had prayed in our little robing room, Bob said something I'll never forget and which I think about every Reformation Sunday: "When we are together" he said, "I feel the pain of our separation."

In the heart of God we are one. It is the vision and the future to which God calls us—and to which, I pray, we shall be worthy.